SPORTS

Winchester female wrestlers part of fastest growing high school sport in U.S.

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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Winchester High School wrestlers Eleonora Siciliano, left, Maria Baldwin and Anshu Patra with Coach Ryan Errico at the team practice room at the high school. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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Baseball, basketball, football, track. These might have once been popular sports for high school athletes, but there's another sport gaining

ground.

The National Federation of State High School Associations estimates the popularity and growth of wrestling has far surpassed more traditional sports. In fact, the number of boys and girls wrestling at the high school level has increased over the last several years, with boys participation up 25% since 2022.

But girls wrestling has gone further, having quintupled since 2013, making it the fastest growing sport on the high school level nationwide.

The sport is so popular that 45 states have sanctioned girls wrestling as its own event, including state championships for the sport. And, the National Collegiate Athletic Association is adding women's wrestling as its 91st championship sport, beginning in 2026.

"There's been such substantial growth, it's doubled and even tripled," said Winchester High School wrestling coach Ryan Errico, of girls wrestling. "I would say one in three teams now has a girl on it and we've seen full girl teams starting to pop up."

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At Winchester High School, the wrestling team isn't just for boys. It includes freshman Eleonora Siciliano, left, senior Anshu Patra and sophomore Maria Baldwin. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

And while it's great to see the sport grow, it's a bit old hat for Errico and the Winchester High School team, where three girls wrestle.

"I have the same philosophy no matter if it's boys or girls wrestling," Errico said, of his program. "You come in, work hard and take this seriously. Everyone has a right to be here. I've always been enthusiastic about these girls wrestling."

It may have seemed a bit weird for the boys the first year, but Errico said they eventually get over it. It's now the norm.

The girls — freshman Eleonora Siciliano, sophomore Maria Baldwin and senior Anshu Patra — couldn't agree more.

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Love of the sport

All three of Winchester's female wrestlers didn't just take up the sport when they arrived at the high school. In fact, all three had either joined a youth program or had taken it up in another location.

But the question is: why do they do it? What's the appeal?

"Confidence," Patra said. "It has brought me a lot of confidence. I found this was a great way to get fit and meet new people."

Baldwin and Siciliano also like the mental mindset.

"It's a different way of thinking," Baldwin said. "The way we move, the flexibility we have."

But were the boys accepting? Patra has a unique take because she's the first girl at WHS to stick with the program.

"When I walked it, it was very daunting," Patra said. "I remember I was a sophomore and I was so scared. But when I look back, I had no reason to be because this ended up being a good place for me."

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WHS wrestler Eleonora Siciliano fights for a takedown during a JV 106-pound bout against non-league Marblehead on Feb. 4. COURTESY PHOTO

She said those first experiences on the mat were less about how her teammates reacted to her and more about the way parents reacted.

“My parents got a lot of questions,” Patra said. “Someone would ask my mom, ‘Which one is your son?’ and she would say, ‘Oh, that’s my daughter.’”

Baldwin and Siciliano said they’d heard about a girl wrestler on the high school team, but didn’t meet Patra until they joined the squad. But they also agreed their male teammates aren’t really the problem.

“The parents get weird,” Siciliano said. “In Chicopee, I had this one kid who was walking around and saying he was going to wrestle a girl. When we got on the mat, everyone cheered. I think he was surprised. I only lost by one point.”

Although girls might still be a novelty at meets for parents, Baldw

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most of the kids are OK with it.

"If the kids are open, I find that the parents will be, too," Baldwin said.

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Difficulties

If parents and teammates don't phase them, just what do the WHS girls find to be the most difficult thing about wrestling?

"Getting outmuscled," Siciliano said. "Even in the light weight class, they're still heavier and a lot stronger than you."

Her teammates agreed.

"It's more mental, in terms of your expectations," Patra said. "Even if you win, you don't win. My first year, I beat this guy and he got a lot of flack for being beaten by a girl and I got joked with."

Don't get her wrong. Patra likes to win.

"Of course, we want to win," she said, with a laugh. "We're competitive! We put up a good fight and we love the sport."

And you can't quit.

"We have our teammates and the coach and they are helping you not to quit," Siciliano said. "You really need the right mindset for this sport."

Baldwin said it's important to remember the great things about wrestling.

"It helps you be more open," Baldwin said. "It makes me feel like anything, if I work hard enough and want it enough."

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Winchester High School Red & Black head wrestling coach Ryan Errico with Anshu Patra, left, and Maria Baldwin after both girls placed in the Division 1 state meet last Saturday, Feb. 22 at North Andover High School to secure a spot in this weekend's All-State Meet in Methuen. COURTESY PHOTO/ABANI PATRA

Errico said the girls practice and work out just as hard as their male counterparts. And they have not only worked with the junior varsity wrestlers, they work out with the varsity team as well.

There are also all-girl tournaments the WHS wrestlers attend. While you might think they enjoy that, it's a mixed bag.

"All the girls are friendly," Patra said. "There are less of us so most of us have met."

Baldwin said the all-female tournaments are great.

"There's less awkward treatment afterwards," she explained. "Th lot of issues if you beat them."

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Siciliano pointed out it can also be difficult because with so few girls, you get to know each other's moves.

"It's a more challenging match," she said.

What's next?

As Winchester's wrestling team moves into the postseason, what happens afterwards?

Patra is getting ready to graduate, but she plans on staying with wrestling as long as she can.

"I'm going to keep going, on the club level, at least," she said. "Wherever I go, I'll be involved in some sort of wrestling. So, I know I want to continue that."

Baldwin has two more years at WHS so she's concentrating on that. And Siciliano is all about the next three years.

"I think I'm going to keep wrestling all through high school," she said. "I might also keep up on the club level, but by the time I get to college, there might be more opportunities. I want to see how that turns out."

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Winchester High School wrestlers Eleonora Siciliano, left, Maria Baldwin and Anshu Patra with Coach Ryan Errico at the high school. Errico says the girls on the team work just as hard as the boys, but he adds with a laugh that they treat him better. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Errico said the girls bring a real energy to the team.

“They are always so happy,” he said. “They talk to me a lot. I’d say my plan is to bolster the awareness of wrestling, in general, but girls wrestling brings a whole other facet.”

The girls also offer some advice to others who are thinking about trying out for the wrestling team.

“If you want to do it, try it,” Siciliano said. “You’ve got nothing to lose and you have a lot to gain in terms of friendship and a new mindset.”

Winchester’s first girl wrestler said it’s definitely worth the time

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whirl.

"I say definitely try it," Patra said. "Even if you hate it after one practice. But, you just might love it and then you will want to wrestle all four years like I did!"

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Winchester boys basketball heads to Bridgewater-Raynham for Sweet 16 game after beating Lexington in postseason opener

It was the third meeting this year between Middlesex League boys basketball rivals Lexington (16-5, 11th seed) and Winchester (17-4, 22nd seed). They split the first two during the regular season, thus making this Round of 32 postseason matchup the impromptu rubber game of this year's series, with the

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Winchester wrestling enjoys Top 10 finish at state divisional meet; senior captains move on to All-States

After the Winchester High qualified wrestlers competed hard over two days last weekend (Feb. 20, 21) in the State Division 1 Meet at North Andover High School, Mother Nature gave them a break to rest and recuperate with Monday's blizzard that resulted in two days off from

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Winchester boys hockey advances to the Sweet 16 after beating Wachusett in the tournament opener

The Winchester High boys hockey team (12-9-2), the 17th seed, edged the 16th-seeded Wachusett Regional Mountaineers (18-2-1), 5-4 in a Round of 32 Division 1 state tournament game at Westborough's Northstar Ice Arena on Feb. 25. The Red & Black will now take on top seed Catholic Memorial (18-2-1)

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With postseason starting Friday night, WHS boys hoop seniors English, Sarpong, Burbine join Middlesex League elite

The Winchester High boys basketball team, the 22nd seed, will take on Middlesex League rival Lexington, the 11th seed, to begin the Division 1 state tournament in the Round of 32 on Friday night, Feb. 27, starting at 6 p.m. These teams are so evenly matched, beginning with the

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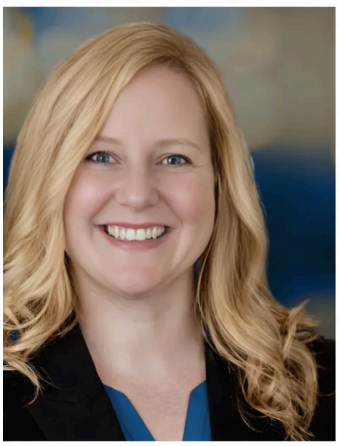

EVENTS

Celebrate Women's History Month with Girls Leading Change

The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: To mark Women's History Month and International Women's Day in 2026, the Network for Social Justice is collaborating with club leaders from Winchester High School and members of the Community Health team from La Colaborativa in Chelsea and

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NEWS

Winchester School Committee candidates bring contrasting backgrounds to Thursday forum

Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

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FEATURES

'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. Set in the 1920s, this iconic production is sure to leave the audience wanting more. Performances will

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Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents 'Syldason: You Are Welcome Here'

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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